

SPIDER-MAN 3: BEHIND THE SCENES WITH DIRECTOR, SAM RAIMI

Written by: Martyn Palmer

Sam Raimi has loved Spider-Man ever since he was a kid growing up in Michigan dreaming of making movies one day.

"I loved the character of Peter Parker because I could relate to him and I loved the stories," he says. "And I've always loved every part of the movie making process; writing the screenplay, the filming, working with the actors, editing, everything."

Those passions would eventually combine to create two critically acclaimed box office hits featuring his beloved web slinger. And with the eagerly awaited world wide release of Spider-Man 3 in May of 2007, some would say that director Sam Raimi has far exceeded his childhood dream.

Right now, Raimi is just plain exhausted after working round the clock to deliver on time his final cut of the film. But his enthusiasm for the character burns as brightly as it did when, as a seven year old, he first read one of his older brother's Spider-Man comics.

"My brother, who is six years older than me, sat me down and explained who Spider-Man was and shared something with me that was obviously a great interest to him. I grew to love Spider-Man too and follow his adventures."

His admiration for the legendary Stan Lee, who originally created the Spider-Man character in 1962 for Marvel Comics, is limitless. He credits Lee with creating a believable character that youngsters could empathise with.

"Stan Lee created real characters with real journeys to go on," explains Raimi. "There was real dramatic interaction between the heroes and the villains and real lives that they were a part of."

"Instead of kids looking up to an older man, like Superman or Batman, he said 'I'll make the kid the hero' and the problems he has are problems that kids can relate to the world over – with parents, friends, girls and homework, school and teachers and bullies and being the outcast. It all came from Stan's original stories and where he placed the characters."

Raimi's deep and instinctive understanding of the character has been an essential part of the movies' success, says no less a Spider-Man authority than Stan Lee himself.

"Sam approaches the films so intelligently," says Lee. "He does on the screen what I always tried to do in print and he treats Peter Parker as a very real empathetic character – somebody you can understand, somebody you can feel sorry for because he has a number of personal problems."

“Sam is a wonderful director and an intelligent human being. He plays up the elements that make a good story; not just a good superhero story, but a good story.”

So what can we expect for Spider-Man 3? Certainly another great story if the tantalising hints that Raimi reveals are anything to go by. Peter Parker is about to face some of his toughest challenges yet as praise for Spider-Man’s courageous exploits goes to his head and even his relationship Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst) is under threat.

The lines between good and bad are blurred and Peter Parker discovers that he too, has a dark side to his nature. “And there are two great new villains, Sandman and Venom, who provide all sorts of challenges and excitement,” says Raimi.

At the end of Spider-Man 2 life was good for Peter Parker. He had defeated the villainous Doctor Octopus and had won the love of the girl he adores, Mary Jane. What’s more is Mary Jane had learned the secret and had accepted that Parker was Spider-Man.

The one cloud on this clear blue horizon is his troubled relationship with his long time friend, Harry Osborn (James Franco) who also knows that Parker is Spider-Man and believes that he killed his father, Norman Osborn aka The Green Goblin, played so memorably by Willem Dafoe in the first movie.

“I would say that the theme of the new film is forgiveness,” says Raimi. “It’s a lesson that Peter Parker has to learn in this third instalment of these Spider-Man films. He’s learned a great deal about responsibility and he’s learned about friendship and now he’s got to learn to quell his pride and listen to others.

“And through listening maybe a certain amount of forgiveness can be learned, because really he’s a creature of vengeance.”

When Parker learns new details about the murder of his Uncle Ben he sets off on the trail of the man he believes is the killer, escaped convict Flint Marco (Thomas Haden Church) who has the ability to transform himself into the awesomely destructive Sandman.

“He has been an avenger ever since he lost his Uncle Ben to the hand of a murderer,” says Raimi. “And he’s been paying down the debt of guilt that he feels with that vengeance.

“Each act of bringing these other criminals to justice is pretty much something he should have done originally but never did. But that’s only so high a place to rise to.

“When the picture opens he sees himself as the hero and he sees these others as sinners and he’s going to bring them to justice. A greater lesson for him to learn would be that he’s not completely without sin himself and that these criminals he quickly labels as the ‘bad guys’ are not completely evil human beings.

“And through that understanding of collective humanity – that he isn’t just ‘the good guy’ and they aren’t entirely ‘the bad guys’ – comes the ability to recognise that some crimes are worth forgiving and that some people are worthy of forgiveness.”

If character and story are central to Raimi's filmmaking ethos, the ability to create mind blowing action sequences through ground breaking CGI animation and painstakingly filmed 'live' stunt shots have become a hallmark of the Spider-Man films. Spider-Man 3 is no exception.

The new villains – Sandman and Venom – presented their own unique challenges to the filmmakers. Sandman can shape himself into any object or creature and dissolve into a million grains of sand before forming into something entirely different - a striking image that is not exactly easy to create on film.

"We've been trying very hard to out do ourselves and we have had a great team of artists and technicians on the CGI and animation storyboard side," says Raimi of the visual effects challenges in Spider-Man 3.

"It's really a team of hundreds of people that work on these pictures that are responsible for any improvements and I think they out did themselves this time.

"There were about 900 different effects shots in total and each one was different and a different challenge. We had to figure out 'how do we make Sandman? How do we make sand move a grain at a time in such a way so that it stacks properly? Sand, has a certain degree of repose, it doesn't really stack at a 40-degree angle or a 20-degree angle.

"So there was a lot of things we had to learn about the materials we were shooting with and we had to shoot a lot of camera tests because we had to recreate the sand and create a character out of the Sandman.

"And everything he did had to really feel like it was really made out of real sand as opposed to a CGI computer pixel. So a lot of research went into the movement of sand, the look of it, how it interacts with the light, how it falls, how it blows. I spent a lot more time photographing sand than I wish I had!"

Venom too, presented plenty of obstacles for the team. Venom is created by an alien symbiote, which initially looks like black goo. This alien form attaches itself to Peter Parker and turns him into a black suited Spider-Man with enhanced powers.

"It's a story of Peter Parker's movement into darkness," says Raimi. "We use the black suit as a metaphor: the darker he gets as a human being, the more the alien symbiote is drawn to him until he literally wears a black suit."

When Parker realises that he is being taken over by this alien life force, he eventually is able to free himself from it. However it finds a new host in fellow Daily Bugle photographer Eddie Brock (Topher Grace); transforming Eddie into Venom, a fearsome creature with similar powers to Spider-Man.

"Venom is made of this black liquid that comes to life and we had to figure out how that would move. Would it just flow like water? Would it be more solid? How could it have a persona if it just moved like water? It had to have menace. So there was a tremendous amount of animation tests to work out how something like that would come about.

“We tried to take what we had learned on the first two pictures and what all our artists had learned and stand on the shoulders of all the achievements made by all the other effects companies and all the technology that had been developed around the world and apply it to this picture at this time.”

Advancements in technology were not the only things that progressed. Raimi admits his relationship with the core cast has deepened over the years they have been working together. Kirsten Dunst as Mary Jane, James Franco as Harry Osborn and of course Tobey Maguire as Peter Parker/ Spider-Man all returned, like their director, for a third time.

“Our relationship has got better and better,” he says. “It’s about friendship that has developed with people you have worked with constantly and trust more and more and have a shorthand and familiarity and a comfort level with.

“And that’s certainly how it is with Tobey and myself. And when I say shorthand, that’s not to say things are easy. We certainly have our intense conversations, but we can move past the mundane issues much quicker now and get to the heart of what the scene is about.

“We are really not afraid to experiment with each other and we toss ideas back and forth. We trust each other, I think completely, and he knows that he can try things that I’m asking for that may seem way out there and I can let him experiment in a different way. And we both know that we are each other’s safety nets.

“Three pictures is a lot to do together – certainly in seven years – and we’ve developed a very good friendship and a very good level of trust for each other. I think it’s a wonderful collaboration.”

The new cast members – including Haden Church, Grace and Bryce Dallas Howard who plays Gwen Stacy – joined the established group but settled in smoothly.

“It was probably easier for the new cast than it was for the others (in the past) because they had seen the previous two films and knew the direction and style of the pictures,” says Raimi.

“They knew that we were after realistic performances and a real journey with the characters and that’s part of the reason why they signed up for it, I think. So it was a very easy process to incorporate them into the family of Spider-Man actors and they took to it very well and contributed a great deal, each and every one of them.”

Raimi, 47, was born in Royal Oak, Michigan and was making movies before he was 10 years old. Back then he wrote, directed and often appeared in his own films, along with close friends Bruce Campbell and Robert G Tapert.

Before Raimi had left his teens he had made his first movies, *It’s Murder*, and *Within The Woods*. Three years later he wrote and directed *The Evil Dead*, a low budget, witty horror film which gained cult status and announced the arrival of a genuinely innovative filmmaker.

Raimi continued to explore the horror genre, making *Evil Dead II* and then *Darkman*, based on the comic book character. He was also interested in subjects that were ‘off kilter’, which led him to direct a western, *The Quick and the Dead*, with a quite remarkable cast including

Sharon Stone, Gene Hackman, a young Leonardo DiCaprio and a pre-Gladiator Russell Crowe.

The excellent thriller *A Simple Plan*, with Billy Bob Thornton and Bill Paxton came next and then the romance *For Love of the Game* with Kevin Costner and Kelly Preston, before he directed Cate Blanchett as a clairvoyant in the supernatural thriller, *The Gift*.

He first discovered that his beloved Spider-Man was going to be made into a movie when he read about it in the trade magazines. The article also printed a list of possible directors. Raimi's name wasn't on it.

Fortunately the press reports were wrong and he was very much in the frame. At a meeting with studio bosses and producers he did his best to convince them that it was a film he was born to direct. They agreed.

"I got a call telling me I had got the job," he said later. "And it was exhilarating."

But looking back on it now, Raimi admits he did not anticipate the massive box office and critical success of Spider-Man and Spider-Man 2.

"I knew how great the character was because I grew up loving him so I just assumed it would be a successful picture. I thought people would like it because I always loved the comic book. But I had no idea it was going to be as successful as it was.

"I had never really made a movie that made money before. The pictures that I had made were usually lower budget, off kilter, non mainstream types of independent films. Not that I hadn't made studio films, but this was the biggest by far. So I didn't expect that amount of financial success or critical success with the picture."

When it came to directing the third chapter of the Spider-Man films, the criteria was exactly the same as it was for the other two, says Raimi. "When it came down to the third one the real challenge was 'where did we leave the character at the end of the second film? What did Peter learn and what journey does he still have to go on?' It's about making the film interesting. That's always the challenge."

In the months after filming finished, Raimi worked round the clock in his editing suite to make sure that his picture would be ready for a May 2007 release. When this interview was conducted in mid April he joked: "I'm at the finishing line! But I'm exhausted and mentally weary."

It's been an amazing journey and already there's speculation about whether he will be back to make a fourth Spider-Man film. "I'm sure Sony Pictures is busy working on the fourth one right now," he laughs. "But I've been so busy working on the third film I haven't had time to think about the fourth one yet."

That's for the future. In the meantime, it's best to sit back and enjoy the incredible spectacle that is Spider-Man 3....

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